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ABSTRACT

This information brief on the successful transition of students with disabilities to postsecondary educational settings focuses on the importance of the student's full participation in the Individualized Education Program (IEP) process during secondary school and the student's developing understanding of differences between secondary and postsecondary school environments. It notes that the IEP process usually stresses the student's immediate needs and assessed deficits and fails to encourage student participation in the process itself. Discussion of differences in federal policy pertaining to secondary and postsecondary school considers differences in governing legislation and different requirements on institutions. A table compares discrepancies in assistance across secondary school and postsecondary school. Specific recommendations are offered concerning the following: (1) changes in policy; (2) differences across environments; (3) lack of attention to the role of youth; (4) preparation for postschool responsibilities and goals. A second table lists steps that secondary school personnel can take to address problems concerning youth with disabilities and the provision of educational assistance. (DB)

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NCSET Issue Brief

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Issue Brief

Examining Current Challenges in Secondary Education and Transition

National Center on Secondary Education and Transition

Creating Opportunities for Youth With Disabilities to Achieve Successful Futures

A partnership of —

Institute on Community Integration, University of Minnesota, Minneapolis, Minnesota

National Center for the Study of Postsecondary Education Supports (RRTC), University of Hawai'i at Manoa

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Supporting Youth with Disabilities to Access and Succeed in Postsecondary Education: Essentials for Educators in Secondary Schools

By Robert A. Stodden and Megan A. Conway

Issue: Efforts to improve the postsecondary school outcomes of youth with disabilities have focused on curriculum quality and non-academic opportunities. Equally important is ensuring that students are participants in the IEP process and understand the differences between secondary and postsecondary school environments.

Introduction

The Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) currently mandates that youth with disabilities in secondary school must be provided with the educational assistance (special education and related services) necessary for the youth to *benefit* from a free appropriate public education. School districts are required to identify and assess the needs of students for such assistance. Examples of types of assistance often provided at the secondary school level include the provision of *direct services*, such as instruction in a special classroom or the provision of special academic content, and/or *related services*, such as the provision of speech therapy, tutoring, orientation and mobility services, or a one-on-one classroom aide.

Both the type and method of educational assistance provision that a student receives throughout secondary school are planned and implemented by a team

made up of professionals and parents who are responsible for the student's Individualized Education Program (IEP). These teams are required by federal policy to consider transition planning, meaning planning for the transition from secondary school to postsecondary school or employment, beginning at age 14, or younger if appropriate. The public agency is required to invite the student with a disability to participate in the IEP transition planning process. However, despite the intent of federal policy, the IEP process often does not consider the need that youth with disabilities have to participate in and understand the process of determining appropriate types of educational assistance. Nor does this process adequately take into account the differences in assistance determination and provision encountered by youth with disabilities as they transition into postschool environments (see Table 1)(Stodden, Jones, & Chang, 2002).

Focus on Immediate Needs and Assessed Deficits

The process of planning and implementing educational assistance for students with disabilities in secondary school is often focused upon their immediate need to benefit from current educational activities with less consideration given to future goals or the skills or behaviors required to function in postschool settings. For example, a student with a visual impairment might be assigned an aid to read aloud exams in English class, which takes care of the immediate problem of having access to the exam. However, the purchase of a computer with voice output in this case would likely allow the student to independently access most printed materials in all classes for the entire year and beyond.

Additionally, special education services in secondary school are often focused on the assessed deficits of a student with a disability rather than upon accommodations addressing the contextual needs of the educational setting (Stodden, Stodden, Gilmore, & Galloway, 2001). For example, students with learning disabilities might be assigned to special education classrooms with modified content, because it is the most efficient way to address the learning needs of these youth, and not because that environment is necessarily one where students learn skills and behaviors that are needed in order to perform after secondary school. The student may just as well have benefited from having the general curriculum material presented in a different format in a regular classroom setting.

Minimal Role of the Student in the IEP Process

Although youth with disabilities need to participate in and learn about the process of determining their own educational assistance, this is rarely encouraged in the IEP process. Although school districts are required by IDEA to invite students with disabilities to their IEP planning meeting, students are not required to actually attend. Students may choose not to attend out of lack of interest or understanding of the planning process (Brinckerhoff, 1994). Even if a student does attend, (a) the student may not possess the necessary self-advocacy skills needed to participate meaningfully in the process of determining the most appropriate types of educational assistance (Izzo & Lamb, 2002), and (b) there is no guarantee that the goals and experiences of the student will be considered by the IEP team (responsibility lies with the local education agency and the parents of the child to make such decisions until the child obtains the age of majority).

Differences in Federal Policy Pertaining to Secondary and Postsecondary School

Federal policy plays a significant role in governing the process of determining the level and type of assistance that will be provided to a young person with a disability in secondary school and in postschool environments (Stodden, Whelley, Chuan, & Harding, 2001). Within secondary schools the provision of educational assistance is regulated by the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA), while within the postschool settings of postsecondary education and employment, the determination for and provision of assistance is regulated by the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) and Section 504 of the Rehabilitation

Act. Within postschool settings, youth with disabilities are no longer entitled to "services" that will ensure educational benefit or success. Rather, postsecondary schools are required to provide assistance in the form of the "accommodations" that a student needs in order to have equal *access* to their programs.

Consequently, the provision of assistance at the postschool level is often less comprehensive and not as individualized as it might be at the secondary school level. Examples of assistance, or accommodations, at the postsecondary education level include priority enrollment, the provision of class notes, and the provision of sign language interpreters. Another difference in terms of the provision of assistance at the secondary and postsecondary levels is that students are not required to have IEPs in postsecondary education settings. Nor, in fact, are postsecondary institutions even required to provide students with assistance unless students identify themselves as (a) having a disability; (b) having documentation of that disability (again, the IEP is usually not considered valid documentation at the postsecondary level); and (c) actively requesting and advocating for accommodations related to their disability. At the secondary school level, the local education agency and the IEP team are responsible for identifying and assessing students' assistance needs, with the students' participation in this process voluntary. At the postsecondary school level, students are required to initiate, document, and advocate for their assistance needs.

Current and Recommended Status

Differences in policy

Current: Students with disabilities and their parents are often not aware that federal regulations under IDEA cannot be used as the basis for procuring assistance related to one's disability beyond the secondary school years. Nor are many parents and students aware of the fundamental differences between the laws governing the provision of special services, supports, or accommodations in secondary school and those governing postsecondary school environments.

Recommended: Secondary schools should fully inform parents and students with disabilities about the differences in federal policy governing the provision of assistance in secondary and postsecondary school environments, and about how these differences will impact the provision of assistance once the student leaves high school. They are provided with comprehensive information about the process of determination and the different types of assistance that the student will need to seek out in order to succeed in postsecondary school environments. Likewise, they are informed about which agencies and/or postsecondary

Table 1

Overview of Discrepancies in Assistance Across Secondary School and Postsecondary School

Secondary School	Postsecondary School
Assistance mandated by the provisions of IDEA and due process requirements	Assistance directed by Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act and ADA
Special classrooms, curriculum, and supplemental services to provide "benefit" and "success"	"Reasonable" accommodations to assist "equal access" as defined by ADA and the Rehabilitation Act
Students as non-participants or observers of the assistance process (limited or no self responsibility)	Students as initiators, advocates for and managers of their own assistance (full self responsibility)
Success measured in terms of educational benefit	Success measured in terms of postschool competence and long-term goals

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offices can provide this assistance. This information is provided at the beginning of the transition process, along with a mandated invitation to participate in transition planning, focused upon the requirements that will need to be met in order for the student to access and participate in postschool environments.

Differences across environments

Current: In secondary school, special education and relative services are often provided in the form of direct services, with supplementary services provided in addition to or instead of direct services. In postsecondary education and employment, assistance is provided in the form of accommodations to the general setting that does not extend beyond what is deemed to be, as indicated in ADA, "reasonable" [SEC 101(9)] (Stodden, Dowrick, Stodden, & Gilmore, 2002). Students with disabilities are not always able to apply specialized educational content, learning strategies, or methods of assistance or support that they observed or learned in secondary school to the very different context of postsecondary school environments.

Recommended: Secondary schools should explore the effectiveness of models of assistance provision that best prepare students with disabilities to meet the requirements of postsecondary education and employment environments, without compromising the student's need to benefit from their secondary school education. This process includes the movement towards participation in more inclusive settings by the time the student reaches the age of transition (14-16 years of age).

Lack of attention to the role of youth

Current: Despite the fact that IDEA requires public agencies to invite students to their IEP meetings when transition is discussed, the reality is that youth with disabilities often do not choose to attend, or are not encouraged nor prepared to be active participants in their IEP planning. Often as not, students transition from an environment where they are observers of the process of determining educational assistance (secondary school), to an environment where they are expected to be initiators, advocates, and active participants in the process of obtaining and maintaining their own assistance (postsecondary school and employment) (Izzo & Lamb, 2002). Youth with disabilities are rarely encouraged to become knowledgeable about the nature of their disabilities and how their disabilities affect their ability to learn and to work. Youth with disabilities are also seldom encouraged to develop the necessary skills they will need to initiate, advocate for, and manage the assistance that they will need in order to learn and work in the postschool world.

Recommended: Secondary schools should involve youth with disabilities in activities that fully inform students about the nature of their disabilities and their service, support, and accommodation needs in learning and work settings. This is accomplished through providing students with an understanding of their assessment results, including information about diagnosis, appropriate services, and the application of accommodations, in accessible and age-appropriate format. Schools also go beyond simply inviting students to attend their IEP meetings to fully including students with disabilities in the process of determining, advocating for, and maintaining their own modes of assistance.

Preparation for postschool responsibilities and goals

Current: The IEP process is often short sighted when focusing upon students' postschool educational and employment needs and goals (Izzo, Hertsfeld, & Aaron, 2001). When the IEP team fixates upon the immediate needs of a youth for specialized services and supports that demonstrate educational benefit, there is little consideration given to the youth's need to be prepared for the requirements of postschool environments.

Recommended: Secondary schools should structure IEP planning around the student's long-term goals and track the effectiveness of assistance provision in relation to attainment of those goals. This may be accomplished through the development of student portfolios that detail a record of student skill development, the relationship between skill development and effective and ineffective practices in the provision of assistance, and the student's long-term goals as they arise (see Table 2). These portfolios are reviewed and updated annually. Schools are encouraged

Table 2

Steps that Secondary School Personnel Can Take to Address Problems Concerning Youth with Disabilities and the Provision of Educational Assistance

To address the problem that . . .	Secondary schools can . . .
. . . parents and students are not aware of differences in federal policy governing educational assistance provision in secondary and postsecondary school.	. . . include information about differences in legal requirements and student assistance needs in the transition process.
. . . educational strategies used by students in secondary school cannot easily be applied to postsecondary school.	. . . explore new educational assistance (accommodations) strategies and move students towards more inclusive settings (similar to post-school environments).
. . . students are not knowledgeable about their disability related needs or how those needs can be addressed by the assistance that is available in different postschool settings.	. . . provide students with disabilities and their parents with comprehensive information and instruction concerning the process and results of disability assessments, and fully include students in the IEP process (deciding types of educational assistance).
. . . the IEP process does not take into account effective practices as they relate to long-term goals and the need of youth with disabilities to access and participate in postschool settings.	. . . ensure that IEP team structure and process during the secondary school years focus on long-term goals, and develop student portfolios that track the effectiveness of strategies of assistance provision.

to reject practices that have not proven to be effective for the student and to explore new practices that have demonstrated promise for other students or districts.

Conclusion

In summary, significant differences exist between secondary and postsecondary school environments, and services provided in each setting. Through informed, careful planning, these differences can be addressed to improve the transition process for youth with disabilities.

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